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ABSTRACT

Two models may be used to describe school board governance. The democratic model defines effectiveness in terms of democratic criteria. It is characterized by vigorous competition for school board positions; board members are responsive to their constituencies; the superintendent acts as policy implementor rather than policy originator, and a chain of direct accountability is maintained among the public, the board, and the superintendent. The professional model dictates that board members should defer to the superintendent, who is the expert capable of making policy decisions most advantageous to the clientele (students). Selection of board members should not be characterized by controversy over the issues, as in the democratic model. Each board member must decide for himself which model (and concept of effectiveness) is most desirable. The research on which these remarks are based indicates that school boards and superintendents often fail to ascertain what their communities want. There is little citizen participation in board policy-setting. In most cases, the board follows the lead of the superintendent in policy-making. One conclusion to be drawn from this data is that the professional model is the dominant one. (DS)

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by

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WHAT MAKES SCHOOL BOARDS EFFECTIVE?

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My remarks are based upon two sources of data: a systematic survey of school board members and superintendents in randomly selected districts, and a nine-month, in depth study of eleven school districts. The data collection strategy is somewhat complex, but hopefully provides a comprehensive view of school board and superintendent behavior.

The first phase of the project was to select a large sample in order to provide sufficient breadth. We believed that most studies of school governance suffered because of lack of generalizability. 82 boards and superintendents were selected, and all board members and superintendents were interviewed in two-hour sessions. Additionally, we augmented this sample with similar interviews in the thirteen largest Standard Metropolitan Statistical Areas. The sample, as finally constituted, ranges from the largest to the smallest school districts.

Having achieved a realistic level of generalizability, we recognized that we were sacrificing depth for breadth. Thus, we conducted research in the sm smaller eleven district sample in a substantially different way, incorporating both systematic observation of events and periodic recording of participants' perceptions. For nine months, in 1974-75, we gathered the following information:

(1) Objective records of all statements and decisions made at central school board meetings, meetings of the superintendent and his administrative cabinet, and other formally constituted media of communication exchange (e.g., regional board meetings, public hearings, etc.).

(2) Regular (weekly) interviews with school board meetings, superintendents, and other senior administrators in order to record all private or informal communications. Those who made presentations at public meetings were also interviewed concerning their perceptions of how they had been received by school district officials.

Thus, the sample is small, but the amount of information is immense.

Unfortunately, claiming title to an overwhelming amount of information provides little help in addressing the question of effective school boards, as one's definition of "effective" is subjective. What I regard as effective may well be viewed quite differently by the majority of school board members. Researchers are bothered by such terms because they are seductive. It is tempting to try to persuade you to accept my view by a dazzling display of data and analysis. I will make every effort to resist this temptation.

The first task, then, is to describe a variety of possible definitions of effectiveness. Next, the conditions (environmental, structural, etc.) associated with each definition can be listed. Finally, you will have to assume the responsibility of reaching your own conclusions. My goal is not prescription but rather explanation.

TWO CONTRASTING NOTIONS OF EFFECTIVENESS

Political scientists (including me) are accustomed to thinking of publicly elected bodies, such as school boards, in terms of the extent to which they approximate an "ideal" model of democracy. Obviously, no public body is the ideal but, by specifying the criteria of a democratic process, assessments are possible. One way to approach the problem of effectiveness, then, is to see to what extent school boards are democratic. The more democratic a board

is, the more effective it is judged.

The ideal board, according to the criteria of democracy, exhibits the following characteristics:

(1) Competition for board positions is vigorous, campaigns between competing candidates are phrased in terms of basic differences in educational philosophy.

(2) Successful candidates seek to implement their ideology by controlling the educational policies of the district.

(3) Board members are "responsive" to their constituents, and attentive to group demands. They "do what the people want."

(4) The superintendent is accountable to the people through the board. He does not make policy, but rather implements the policy of the board. He is a manager.

(5) Thus, a chain of direct accountability is maintained: the superintendent to the board; the board to the community.

Obviously, public bodies rarely achieve such a level of effectiveness. Most, however, accept these criteria as legitimate. School boards are different, not only in the attitudes of board members, but also in the function they perform. They are public bodies, but perform a service for a <u>portion</u> of the public, rather than the public at large. Of course, the public at large benefits, but the primary clients of the school are students (clients) for whom <u>professional</u> services are provided. The welfare of the client is a major concern of school boards. Other publicly elected bodies do not perform a specialized service for a limited clientele. City councils, for example, serve the entire community and provide little professional service.

The <u>professional</u> model of effectiveness, therefore, has fundamentally different criteria:

(1) Since professional services may not be subject to non-professional judgment, competitions for board positions should not be devisive. Rather, candidates should seek such positions on the assumption that educational philosophy is best negotiated without widespread public interest.

(2) Successful candidates should not seek to impose their will upon the district. The clients of the school, students, did not participate in their election.

(3) Therefore, board members need not be responsive to the larger community or its component groups. They should not necessarily do what "the people" want.

(4) Rather, the board should defer to the superintendent, who has the requisite training and expertise to make sound decisions. The role of the board is largely that of selecting a competent superintendent.

(5) Effective boards are those which provide sufficient autonomy for a superintendent to provide appropriate professional services to the clientele of the educational system.

Again, the model is rarely approximated in real life. However, depending upon how one elects to define effectiveness, one can assess one's own board. Which model is "right"? You be the judge. Which model is more closely approximated in reality? What conditions are associated with each model? These are questions which I feel competent to answer.

ELECTIONS

Most boards are elected by a non-partisan, at large system. The elections are staggered, so that no board can undergo a complete change of personnel, and elections are held at times other than general elections. Such

structural constraints, instituted as a consequence of the municipal reform movement, were consciously designed to lower electoral accountability. Numerous studies have demonstrated that such electoral systems depress turnout, and contribute to an election with disproportionate representation of upper status groups. School boards are no exception. Competition for board positions is quite limited. Like all public bodies, the well-to-do are over-represented. Compared to the general public, board members have those qualities traditionally endeared in American society. They are more often male, white, middle aged, better educated, more prestigiously employed, Protestant, devout, Republican, and have been residents longer in their communities. School board members also emanated more often from a home where the father was self-employed and better educated than the general public. They came from backgrounds associated with education rather than politics. The presence of close family members in education predisposes individuals toward board membership, whereas the presence of family members in politics does not.

Additionally, it is a common practice for existing boards to seek out acceptable candidates. This behavior tends to place similar minds on the post election board. One need not believe in conspiracy to accept the fact of deliberate self perpetuation. Board members may engage in recruiting simply to develop any respectable candidates at all! Nevertheless, there is a tendency toward "system closure."

Such a constraining recruitment system does not provide the electorate with clearly defined alternatives. When laid against the ideal norm, school board candidates fall far short, as would probably be the case for most local offices. In many cases, the voter is left to choose between two candidates

promising to "provide the best education for the least money." Even among those candidates who did discern a difference with their opponent, few cited differences concerning the educational program and personnel. The educational program is what schooling is supposed to be all about. It is decisions in this area which are presumed to have the most immediate impact upon the students. Still, the issue is largely absent from board elections.

I am not describing these conditions to condemn them or to praise them. If you regard such a recruitment process as desirable, be reassured. From the point of view of effectiveness according to the democratic model, the criteria of open, recurrent and conflict filled elections are poorly met. If this displeases you, and you wish a more effective board, then the conditions under which such a situation can be realized are reasonably clear: those devices designed to create low levels of competition should be eliminated. Elections should be partisan, from wards rather than at large, held simultaneously with other elections, on a non-staggered basis. Our research has clearly indicated that, when elections are held under these conditions, competition is improved qualitatively and quantitatively. More seats are contested, more incumbents are successfully challenged, more candidates regard their views as in substantial contrast to those of their opponents.

From the point of view of democratic theory, vigorous elections are a sign of political health. Boards which display such characteristics ("unreformed" boards) are "effective." However, before we rush to our state legislatures to demand electoral reconstruction, consider the impact of political competition upon the superintendent. Clearly, the involuntary departure of the superintendent creates a crisis for the school board. By giving a clear signal to the superintendent, either by outright refusal to renew a contract or by

making life so difficult that the superintendent has no choice but to leave, the board invites acerbation of existing school-community conflicts. One must choose sides. Yet involuntary turnover of superintendents is strongly associated with healthy electoral competition. Is a board which finds it impossible to maintain stable relations with administrators "effective"? The conditions for an effective democratic board seem to contradict the conditions for an effective professional board.

LAY PARTICIPATION AND BOARD RESPONSE

The notion of "doing what the people want", a key to democratic effectiveness, but not professional effectiveness, is difficult for board members to achieve, whether or not they agree that they should do so. Our nine-month study of communication indicates that discussions at board meetings are almost completely dominated by the board and administration. Rarely do members of the public speak. Further, when members of the public use informal methods of communicating with board members, they do so largely as individuals with personal problems or suggestions, rather than proposers of broad policy. There are no institutionalized mechanisms for ascertaining what the community wants. Organized interest groups and political parties, which perform the demand articulation function in most political processes, are relatively inactive in educational decision-making.

Lacking any linking mechanism, school board members can hardly be faulted for being "unresponsive." Still, districts with a rich group life do exist. For a political scientist accustomed to the norms of democratic theory, active groups are desirable because of their linking function: they channel and articulate mass demands. Are the boards in such districts "effective"? Certainly so, judging from the democratic model. Consider, however, the costs

of such effectiveness. Districts with active interest groups are also likely to experience: (1) racial conflict, (2) teacher criticism and firings, (3) financial problems and defeats, and (4) superintendent turnovers.

In any case, board members are disinclined to believe that they view their role as one of instructed delegate. Most board members (and even more superintendents) regard the appropriate mode of governance as that of trustee. That is to say, they do not believe they should represent the public's opinion uncritically. They see themselves as best serving the public by acting in accordance with their own judgment (the public, incidentally, disagrees). However, our evidence indicates that their own judgment is most often out of harmony with the views of the public. Boards do not do what "the people" want because (1) they do not believe they should, (2) they do not know what the people want, (3) even if they did, they probably would not modify their views. Is such a board--insulated from public expectations--less effective than one that is the uncritical mirror of public opinion? Again, it depends. Boards which do seek to represent the public are more likely to oppose the superintendent. Such a consequence is natural. If a board seeks to base its opinions on the wishes of lay constituents, the professional standards of the superintendent will be less significant. If a board regards itself as a trustee, freed of the constraints of public opinion, it will be more responsive to superintendent leadership. All the superintendent need do is convince the board that his position is in the best interests of public education. Which lead should the board follow?

THE BOARD AND THE SUPERINTENDENT

In most cases, the board elects to follow the leadership of the superintendent. One might argue that the superintendent "represents" the public,

and thus the board, in following his leadership, does no violence to democracy. In fact, the educational views of the superintendent are even less congruent with the public's than are those of the board. Further, the superintendent's informal communication is heavily biased in favor of parents who agree with his position. Most informal communication is supportive, and not representative of the community. The informal communication of the board is somewhat more diverse. So, when boards accede to the expertise of the superintendent they do so at the expense of representing the public.

The extent to which boards are subordinate to the superintendent is hotly debated. I have written on several occasions that boards do not govern, but rather legitimate, or ratify, the policy recommendations of the superintendent. Such a position is not uncontested. Superintendents have recently lamented that their policy supremacy is slipping, and that their position is beleaguered. I believe that the authority of the superintendent is declining, but not as a consequence of a resurgence of board influence. Rather, superintendents are constrained by forces originating beyond the district (busing requirements, Title I guidelines, etc.).

While these are exceptions, I still argue that boards do not propose policy and rely upon the superintendent to administer policy. Rather, the superintendent proposes policy and the board ratifies it. Superintendents set the agenda, a vitally important function. The power to decide what will be discussed is important in a positive and a negative sense. It is important in a negative sense because it includes the power to decide what <u>will not</u> be discussed. In the absence of discussion, the <u>status quo</u> continues. It is important in a positive sense because whoever decides what will be discussed also tends to establish boundaries and rules of discussion. The power to

the topics and policy alternatives which will be entertained gives the controller of the agenda considerable power in determining what policies will be adopted. Our research sought to ascertain not only the formal responsibility for preparation of a parliamentary agenda, but also who actually was responsible for the issue being raised. Obviously, the superintendent sets the formal agenda. Our evidence also indicates that the superintendent--in concert with administrative staff--sets about 90% of the formal and informal agenda for the board. We also learned that, having set the agenda, superintendents provide policy recommendations about 95 percent of the time. His recommendations are adopted, usually unanimously, about 94 percent of the time. Such a record of success would be the envy of any governor, mayor, or president, and is all the more remarkable because the superintendent is the legal employee of the board.

One should not ignore the very real possibility that superintendents are more constrained than their overt behavior would suggest. They may avoid placing items on the agenda when it appears likely they will face substantial opposition. They may communicate informally with board members to achieve consensus prior to the formal meetings. Thus, substantial bargaining, negotiation, and compromise may occur. By the time the issue is made public, differences between the board and the superintendent are removed.

While such bargaining does occur, it is not the rule. Our monitoring of informal communications does not indicate that pre-public negotiation is a widespread practice. Rather, I believe that public behavior and private behavior are quite similar. Lay boards of education find it difficult to match the resources and expertise of superintendents and are inclined to defer to them. Independent staffs for boards are still scarce, so the superintendent's office is the basic source of information. Often, superintendents, when they

propose a policy, do not provide a rationale for an opposing point of view. Thus, the board must choose between the well developed arguments of the superintendent, or nothing.

Are such boards "effective"? No, from the democratic model; yes, from the professional model. Boards which do challenge the superintendent are most likely to be highly politicized, both structurally (e.g., they are elected by partisan ballot from wards), and emotionally (they are found in communities undergoing severe conflict). In highly politicized atmospheres, the expert resources of the superintendent are not highly regarded. If one regards a board which successfully constrains the superintendent as effective, then large doses of political structure and political conflict are prescribed. Also, such boards are likely to be found in fiscally dependent districts. If one believes that effective boards are those which provide maximum freedom for the superintendent, the politics should be kept out of education.

The separation of education and politics, a major theme in the ideology of American educational governance, clearly enhances the role of the superintendent. If one adopts a professional, as opposed to a democratic model, the status quo is quite satisfactory. Boards of education are, in most cases, not comparable to legislative assemblies. That is, they do not divide into stable factions and initiate policy. The superintendent, trained for the job, is the central actor.

However, even if one accepts the professional model, be aware of its costs. Insulation may free the superintendent from community constraints, but it does not equip him, or the board, to deal efficiently with rancorous conflict. Conflict, "normal" in most political arenas, is difficult to accept in educational policy-making. Thus, when a controversy erupts, district officials frequently prove incapable of effective conflict management. Thus, "crisis"

decision-making occurs, ironically, more often in education than in other public arenas because the professional model is predicated upon the assumption of unity. An effective board, by professional standards, may find itself paralyzed by conflict. An effective board, in democratic terms, may find conflict easy to manage.

Both models of effective boards have costs and benefits. Carried to this extreme, the logic of the democratic model reduces the superintendent to the role of clerk (as he once was). The professional model reduces boards to the role of cheer leaders for the administration (as some, but not all, are). School governance is schizophrenic, as it involves both public good and professional service. No other unit of governance carries such a burden. Perhaps, then, the most effective board is one that finds an appropriate mixture of the two models. Such a task is worthy of the talents of the most skilled practitioners of the art of governance.